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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: VICE PRESIDENT ATIKU -- DISTANCING
HIMSELF FROM OBASANJO?

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASONS
1.6X1, 1.6X6.

11. (S) SUMMARY: During an October 10 meeting with Ambassador Jeter, Vice President Atiku Abubakar admitted his relationship with President Obasanjo was on the shoals, attributing the deterioration to Obasanjo's poor political skills and reliance on malevolent, imprudent advisors. Atiku stated Obasanjo had alienated Ibrahim Babangida, former military ruler Abdulsalami Abubakar and NSA Aliyu Mohammed, the men most instrumental in Obasanjo's 1999 election. Atiku disavowed supporting the impeachment drive but was not working to quash it. The Vice President claimed control of PDP party machinery, with only a small faction loyal to Obasanjo. He saw reconciliation with Obasanjo as unlikely. Yet, leaving an opening, Atiku said that he, Babangida, Abdulsalami, and Aliyu would meet the President that evening to see if fences could be mended. Atiku spoke like a man fed up with a boss he considered unskilled in the calling that he has mastered. Candid about how his relationship with Obasanjo had soured, Atiku did not reveal next steps, but gave the impression that he was both able and willing to contest for the Presidency. Atiku seemed to be measuring whether the political aperture created by Obasanjo's failings and the urging of others (such as Babangida) for Atiku to step forward, was really the opportunity of a lifetime or a trap to destroy him politically. Some pundits and Babangida associates claim that IBB may be setting Atiku up, in an effort to destroy him politically, once and for all. Septel will provide Embassy's analysis of Atiku's current role in Nigerian politics and his prospects for the future. End Summary

HOW IT BEGAN

12. (C) During a ninety minute October 10 meeting at the Vice President's residence, VP Atiku Abubakar told Ambassador Jeter that his relationship with Obasanjo was in tatters. Although tired and under the weather due to the strain and pace of the last few weeks, Atiku provided a detailed chronology of his relationship with the President. Atiku said that he and Obasanjo were relative strangers before the 1998 prelude to the 1999 elections. Their nexus was the late Shehu Yar A'dua. Yar A'dua was second-in-command during Obasanjo's stint as military Head of State. Yar A'dua was also Atiku's political mentor. Atiku inherited leadership of Yar A'dua's political machine, the PDM, when the general died in detention, likely at the sinister hand of the late Sani Abacha.

13. (S) Atiku recalled not only working for Obasanjo's release from prison but also assisting in his ascent to the Presidency. Atiku stated that he along with former Heads of State Babangida and Abdulsalami and current NSA Aliyu Mohammed were the four men most responsible for Obasanjo's successful climb. Seeking to redeem his image after the 1993 electoral debacle, Babangida convinced Obasanjo to run, then placed his considerable clout and money into the "Obasanjo Project." While Babangida pulled the strings from Minna, General Mohammed performed the much of the legwork while also drumming up other support. Then Head of State Abdulsalami backdated Obasanjo's pardon, an act that allowed him to be eligible to contest in the election. Abdulsalami also funneled money into the campaign and steered the considerable powers of incumbency to Obasanjo's favor.

14. (C) Atiku's contribution was political. Exploiting the PDM machinery, Atiku successfully engineered Obasanjo's primary victories in the PDP. Along with Babangida and the others, he recalled working hard to ensure Obasanjo's nomination at the convention. It was at that point, Obasanjo asked Atiku, already Adamawa State's governor-elect and very content with that status, to be his Vice-Presidential running mate. Atiku accepted. On paper, Obasanjo had the credentials of a perfect leader -- a perceived detribalized Yoruba with ties to the North, a former military leader with a good record, and good standing in the international arena; but, in practice, he had fallen far too short of the mark, Atiku lamented. (Comment: Atiku's version of his selection differs from common lore. Most accounts have a reluctant Obasanjo being pressured to take Atiku because of need to cement the support of the PDM faction of the party and to balance the ticket with a running-mate from the North. End comment)

THINGS BEGAN TO SOUR -- ANENIH TO BLAME

15. (C) Although they did not know each other well, Atiku recalled that the two quickly melded. However, there was an early premonition that foreshadowed today's troubles. Atiku recounted having agreed with Obasanjo on whom they would back for the Senate leadership. Shortly thereafter, Atiku went to the United States only to discover Obasanjo had changed heart, selecting another person for the Senate President. According to Atiku, the shift was precipitated by presidential advisors warning Obasanjo that an Atiku loyalist should not be Senate President because Atiku already had too much influence in the Lower House. With one of his men as Senate President, they warned that Atiku could engineer Obasanjo's impeachment. Atiku stated that he acquiesced in the change in order to avoid a confrontation with Obasanjo so early in the Administration.

16. (C) Atiku stated that the relationship with Obasanjo assumed its current negative momentum in April, during preparations for Obasanjo's reelection announcement. Pointing the finger at Works and Housing Minister Tony Anenih as the main culprit, Atiku accused Obasanjo's "handlers" of purposefully misinforming the President that he was angling to announce his presidential bid before Obasanjo's was announced. Obasanjo came to believe these innuendoes when Atiku refused to participate in Anenih's convoking of party figures at Obasanjo's farm in Ota to "request" that Obasanjo run again. Atiku claimed that his absence did not signal opposition to the President; instead, it underscored his distaste for a procession he claimed was too reminiscent of the late Sani Abacha's effort to succeed himself by casting himself as a consensus candidate for civilian President.

17. (C) Atiku contended that Anenih attempted to keep him ignorant of preparations for Obasanjo's reelection announcement and tried to schedule the event when Atiku was abroad. After talking to Obasanjo and disavowing intentions to break the ticket, Atiku said that Obasanjo ordered Anenih to stop his antics and have Atiku participate in the reelection event. Still, Atiku identified these machinations as causing a split that in the intervening months has only worsened.

NO HAND IN THE IMPEACHMENT; NO HAND IN STOPPING IT

18. (C) On the current impeachment crisis, Atiku claimed the President was the victim of his own hubris. Because of Obasanjo's suspicions of his influence in the Lower House, Atiku assiduously avoided contact with its Members, letting the President's other advisors work both Chambers. The President's men quickly antagonized the Representatives. Early on, Atiku remembered telling Obasanjo that a close relationship with the Senate was essential since his advisors had spoiled his relationship with the House. Obasanjo erred in getting involved in Senate President Anyim's tussle with the Ebonyi State Governor over control of the party machinery in that State; in doing so, Obasanjo lost hold of the Senate. With both Houses alienated,

impeachment became possible.

19. (S) Atiku felt the overall aim was not to impeach Obasanjo but to render him unelectable. He disavowed supporting the move. With Obasanjo finally realizing seriousness of the threat by late August, the President asked Atiku to use his influence to calm the waters at the National Assembly. Atiku responded that he would meet House leaders provide Obasanjo's advisors not savage him by claiming Atiku's meetings with House leaders were signs of betrayal. Obasanjo promised his advisors' best behavior. Atiku met with House leaders; as he feared, however, Obasanjo's people accused him of backing the House rebellion. Since then, Atiku claimed to have washed his hands of the affair, leaving Obasanjo and his men to their own devices.

OBASANJO IN DIRE STRAITS IN THE PARTY

10. (C) Because of his lack of political skills, Obasanjo has severely compromised his position in the party. Atiku measured his strength in the PDP as vastly superior to Obasanjo's, clearly suggesting that Obasanjo would have a difficult time securing the party nomination without him. At the PDP's most recent National Executive Committee meeting, Obasanjo suffered an embarrassing defeat when his proposal for the sequencing of the party primaries was roundly defeat by Atiku loyalists. Atiku claimed to have passed a message to Obasanjo's men that they would suffer more defeats if they tried to bypass him again on preparations for the party convention and primaries. Atiku boasted that he held the loyalty of most PDP governors, who generally control their state party machines. He also contended that he controlled the party NEC and that most PDP National Assembly members were loyal to him.

11. (C) Atiku downplayed the potentially negative effect of Obasanjo not gaining the party re-nomination. Obasanjo, he asserted, did not have a large constituency of his own. Thus, his ouster would not convulse the party. Moreover, Obasanjo was not very popular with his own ethnic kinsmen so the Southwest would not erupt as it did with the annulment of the 1993 election.

THE BIG THREE ARE ALSO MAD AT OBASANJO

12. (S) Perhaps more fatal to Obasanjo's chances than his anemic support within the party, is the anger of Babangida, Abdulsalami and Aliyu. Atiku claimed to be in regular contact with the other three whom he described as very disenchanted with Obasanjo. Babangida has sworn off any association with a second "Obasanjo Project," an allusion to their cooperation to elect Obasanjo in 1999. Abdulsalami was miffed when he came to ask Obasanjo for a favor and the President's response was to show him the door. Realizing Obasanjo was digging a hole for himself, Atiku once asked the President if he really understood how he had won office. He warned Obasanjo that it was akin to political suicide to insult these men by telling them they had made a "bad investment" if they expected favors due to their contributions to his election. When Obasanjo pleaded ignorance as to the role of the Big Three in his election, Atiku proceeded to summarize the contributions they and he had made. When the President continued to feign ignorance and asked how he could reconcile with the others, Atiku said he admonished the President for being ungrateful and he knew very well that he had to make amends for past behavior.

13. (S) While in Abuja for the September 23 Commonwealth meeting on Zimbabwe, South African President Mbeki expressed concern about Nigeria's internal politics. Previously, Obasanjo had dismissed his troubles as a teapot's tempest; this time, he admitted to Mbeki that he was in serious trouble. However, when Mbeki tried to meet Atiku, Obasanjo invited himself to the session and placed Mbeki and Atiku in an uncomfortable and embarrassing situation. Atiku said that he choose to leave. However, before

Mbeki departed, he and Atiku managed to talk outside of Obasanjo's earshot, with the VP speaking frankly about the President's political mistakes. Atiku told us that Mbeki wanted to talk to Babangida as well. In the end, Babangida traveled to South Africa with Obasanjo's consent. Mbeki's apparent motive was to patch what was broken but Atiku did not give the venture much chance, particularly given Babangida's position.

14. (S) Atiku said the President's Chief of Staff had admitted that Obasanjo was desperate. In fact, the meeting with Ambassador Jeter was interrupted by several phone calls from the President's Office to arrange a dinner that evening for Obasanjo, Atiku and the Big Three, with Babangida having returned that day from South Africa. Atiku said that for months he had kept the Big Three from breaking openly with Obasanjo. He reminded them that they had enlisted his support for Obasanjo. He then told them that since they had backed Obasanjo together, they all must stick with him or leave him together. While that argument held things in abeyance, the day of decision was near. In a recent conversation, Abdulsalami cautioned Atiku about hitching his political future to Obasanjo's, the Vice President explained. (Comment: It seems unlikely that Obasanjo would have been in haste to hold the dinner without a signal from his friend Mbeki that what Babangida would say would not be too difficult to swallow. However, Mbeki could have misread Babangida. It would not be the first or last time someone misinterpreted Babangida's next steps. End Comment.)

15. (S) Atiku stated his rumored antagonisms with Aliyu and Babangida were media fabrications. He stated Aliyu respected his political clout; in any case, the two operated in different spheres with Aliyu more at home on foreign policy and national security issues. As for Babangida, the former Head of State was encouraging him to run. Atiku, however, would not reveal his next moves, but did tell the Ambassador that he could "put two and two together." He acknowledged the potential turmoil and paralysis of government that could result should he and Obasanjo battled for the PDP nomination. Atiku cryptically said he would do all he could to avoid these negative developments but stopped far short of disavowing presidential ambitions.

16. (S) As the meeting ended, Atiku informed the Ambassador the meeting with Obasanjo was confirmed for that evening. Before going to the Presidential Villa, he and the Big Three would huddle to determine whether to walk away from Obasanjo or give him one more chance, spelling out concrete conditions for keeping their support.

COMMENT

17. (S) While definitely shaped by his own biases, many of Atiku's observations ring true. Obasanjo is crippled politically, having alienated many of his former supporters. From almost all accounts, Atiku does command more loyalty within the party than Obasanjo. However, Atiku's self-portrait as a loyal but unjustly accused and wounded subordinate is exaggerated. There have been constant and credible reports for nearly a year that have Atiku testing the Presidential waters. He considers himself a much better politician than Obasanjo, and he most certainly is. Atiku also believes that Obasanjo has sufficiently fouled his own nest with little chance and dwindling time to rehabilitate his status. First, to win the re-nomination, Obasanjo needs the Big Three to exercise benign indifference if they can no longer support him. Additionally, Obasanjo will need Atiku's active support, something that Atiku currently appears more than content to withhold. It appears that Atiku is standing by watching Obasanjo progressively weaken and gauging the best time to make an aggressive move.

18. (C) However, before laying his cards on the table, Atiku must decide whether the encouragement given by Babangida and others is real or are they simply using his own ambition to entice him into a battle with Obasanjo in hopes that they will neutralize each other. Interestingly, in a private meeting on October 15, the APP Governor of Gombe State, an IBB loyalist

and former Minister in Babangida's government, told the Ambassador that Babangida had been working for almost two years to drive a wedge between Obasanjo and Atiku. Atiku, he said, would probably run for the Presidency and Babangida would destroy him; once and for all. Perhaps the Machiavelli-like "evil genius" has struck again. We shall see.

JETER